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Storytelling, Folktales and the Comic Book Format

Gail de Vos ©2001

The reading process in comics is an extension of text. In text alone the process of reading involves word-to-image conversion. Comics accelerate that by providing the image. When properly executed, it goes beyond conversion and speed and becomes a seamless whole. In every sense, this misnamed form of reading is entitled to be regarded as literature because the images are employed as a language. There is a recognizable relationship to the iconography and pictographs of oriental writing. When this language is employed as a conveyance of ideas and information, it separates itself from mindless visual entertainment. This makes comics a storytelling medium. (Eisner 5)

Will Eisner, in his ground breaking work *Graphic Storytelling*, points out that regardless of the various methods of transmitting a story incorporating any form of modern technology, there are only two major ways for a story to be told: words (orally or written) and images. In comics, these two methods are combined (Eisner 13). Eisner defines a storyteller as the “writer or person in control of the narration” (Eisner 6). I have always considered the term to mean an oral transmitter of a narrative and will apply my denotation throughout this article, which will briefly comment on the way oral storytelling techniques are incorporated and celebrated in the comic book format. The major focus of this article, however, will be on examples of retellings of traditional folktales in comic book format, particularly for the young adult reader.

I became interested in the similarities between oral storytelling and the comic book format when conducting research on reworkings of traditional folktales for *New Tales for Old: Folktales as Literary Fictions for Young Adults* (co-authored with Anna Altmann, Libraries Unlimited 1999). Reading folktales in this format made me realize that this was probably the closest literary genre to the oral art of telling a story. Both the comic book and the oral tale depend on dialogue and tone of voice, body language and gestures, and timing for an effective experience for the audience. Both of these storytelling forms require the audience to actively participate in the understanding of the story; the listening audience must decode the words and silences, the body language and the voice to make their own images of the characters, the stage and the action that is taking place in the tale. The strength of the oral tale is that each member of the audience uses his or her own experiences and background to create a story that is uniquely his or her own. In the comic book format, the reader must speculate on what happens in the gutters (the space between the panels) as well as read the visual cues to interpret the story and, as in the oral tale, the experience and background of the reader not only enrich the story read but also individualize it.

This article is not the first time that anyone has considered comic books in regards to traditional tales. In a study published in 1941, two psychiatrists conclude: “Comic books can probably be

best understood if they are looked upon as an expression of the folklore of this age. They may be compared with the mythology, fairy tales and puppet shows, for example of past ages” (Levine 1372). A few years later, during the mid 1950s and the “comic book scare,” several articles attempted to evaluate the dangers of comics by comparing them with fairy tales and other literature that preceded them, such as *Struwwelpeter*. Some of the critics noted structural and narrative similarities between comics and fairy tales and admitted that fairy tales also were cruel and perhaps inappropriate for children, however, since comic books were read more frequently than the traditional folktales, the quantity of comic consumption made the decisive difference. Other critics rejected the comparison all together on the grounds that such comparisons should not serve as justifications for the horror and cruelty in the comics. “Fairy tales take place in another remote world of “once upon a time,” whereas the aim of horror series was to create a nauseous reality” (Jovanovic and Koch 112-3).

Rolf Brednich, in 1976, reflected that there are numerous structural relations of comics and oral narrative types and in particular, the fairy tale. “European folktales offer—as a sort of universal poetry—a great number of characters, constellations of characters, plots, and so forth, which have been taken over—whether consciously or unconsciously—by the producers of popular and “trivial” literature (Brednich 47). His premise was that “comic book stories and folklore stories appeal to largely the same audience. Both are light entertainment that focus on the adventures of heroes who act outside the restrictions of the established authorities” (Brednich 48).

Most of these critics compared the folktale to the superhero tale and paid no attention at all to the similarities of telling the same story both orally and in the graphic format. This then, is the focus of this article.

Eisner defines an image as the memory of an object or experience recorded either mechanically (photograph) or by hand (drawing). “In comics, images are generally impressionistic. Usually, they are rendered with economy in order to facilitate their usefulness as a language. Because experience precedes analysis, the intellectual digestive process is accelerated by the imagery provided in comics” (Eisner 15). In his discussion of images as narrative tools, Eisner speaks of the benefits of employing stereotypes in the comic book world. Stereotypes are also widely used in the world of folklore. They are the short hand of human experience and allow for the engagement of the listener’s imagination. Everyone knows what a beautiful princess looks and acts like and so the storyteller does not have to stop or slow the telling of the tale to describe the characters or the setting (usually a castle, forest or hut). In both the oral tale and the tale rendered in comic book form, there is not a great deal of time or space available to develop a character in comparison to a film or novel. Thus, the use of the stereotype, but, as Eisner points out, “the art of creating a stereotypical image for the purpose of storytelling requires a familiarity with the audience and a recognition that each society has its own ingrown set of accepted stereotypes” (Eisner 19). This is what makes oral storytelling so powerful and the reading of comic books from other cultures so bewildering!

At the onset of the telling of a story, whether oral, written or graphic, there is an understanding between the teller and the listener, or reader. The teller expects that the audience will comprehend, while the audience expects that the author will deliver something that is comprehensible. In this agreement, the burden is on the teller. In comics, the reader is expected to understand things like implied time, space, motion, sound and emotions. In order to do this, a

reader must not only draw on visceral reactions but also make use of an accumulation of experience as well as reasoning. (Eisner 49)

Eisner claims the reader is an actor because of the importance of dialogue in the graphic format. “Where dialogue is not furnished, it requires that the storyteller depend on the reader’s life experience to supply the speech that amplifies the intercourse between the actors. In depicting a silent sequence of interaction, the comic teller must be sure to employ gestures and postures easily identifiable with the dialogue being played out in a reader’s mind” (Eisner 57). Further on in his discussion about telling stories graphically, Eisner points out that subtle gestures or provocative postures are not easy to depict without the continuing movement afforded by film and therefore the “telling” images are extracted from the flow of action and frozen in the image presented on the page (114). Gestures are hand, body or face movements that aid in the communication process and must spring from strong, detailed images of the scenes, characters and action in the story. In an oral tale, gestures are effective because they translate more directly into specific and powerful images in the listener’s minds than do the words. They provide an important form of detailed visual information for the audience and must contribute to how the story is told. Gestures in comic books also aid in making the printed page and characters on it come alive.

The major difference between the print format and oral storytelling is that the latter transmits images primarily through sound. How the story sounds, however, depends on the individual’s personal interpretation of the tale, the skill in which the storyteller tells the tale, and the listening experience and needs of the audience. Part of this skill also includes the effective use of body language and non-verbal communication cues. While the audience is listening to the sound of the words and decoding the images that are created in their minds, they are also reading the storyteller’s gestures, facial expressions and silences. I have found that it takes just as much fluency and exposure with the storytelling format on the part of the storyteller’s audience to be effective listeners, as it does for the readers of comics to effectively appreciate the story before them. When dialogue is present in the comic format, it appears in various types of sound balloons and fonts that guide the reader (actor) in hearing the conversations. Given the absence of sound, the dialogue in balloons acts as a script to guide the reader in reciting it mentally. The style of the lettering and the emulation of accents are the clues enabling the reader to read it with the emotional nuances the comic teller intended. This is essential to the credibility of the imagery. There are commonly accepted lettering characteristics, which imply sound level and emotion. (Eisner 61)

Eisner also contends that in telling stories in a graphic medium, it is necessary to establish credibility and this is usually done in an economical prologue to the tale. “Stories built around a protagonist often depend on a prologue to quickly introduce him” (86). In oral storytelling, the function of this prologue is looked after in the opening to the story. The opening, often consisting of a brief anecdote that makes the story relevant to the audience or an explanation of something within the tale that the listener needs to know in order to appreciate or understand it better, creates the transition from the world of the listener into the world of the story. The told story, therefore, also employs a closing, which aids in the transition from the world of story back into the listener’s real realm. These closings complete the circle that makes a story and is an

important aspect of an effectively told tale. This, in the graphic world, is done by turning the page or closing the book.

In order to clarify the similarities between the oral storytelling experience and the comic format one, I am going to draw on one of Eisner's own stories: "Street Magic" in his recently published *Minor Miracles*, is a collection of four stories set in the New York City of his youth. "Street Magic" is a story of survival magic for immigrant families new to New York. The splash page, similar in function to the introduction of a folktale, introduces the reader to the major characters, the setting and the problem of the story. It contains a written prologue:

Immigrant families on our block believed they were in hostile territory. Survival skills were brought from the old country. They were kept as magic spells the family used when dealing with the predictable outrages of neighborhood life. They were not formally taught. They were learned by emulating older and more experienced family members.

Cousin Mersh, for instance, was an authority on the application of street magic. (19)

Eisner does not work with the traditional comic book framed panels to tell his story; the reader needs to follow two or three sequential vignettes on each page. The experienced reader knows how to follow the sequence of the illustrations or panels as well as the sequence of speakers and the rate of their speech. This aspect of reading comics is perhaps the most frustrating to those not familiar or comfortable with the format. Eisner's style in this particular story makes this easy for all readers since there are only a few illustrations on each page. Experienced comic book readers also know that the shape of sound balloons in comics offer clues to the reader as well as the content. These are regular dialogue balloons, directed at the reader as if the reader is sitting on the steps with the speakers. Other shapes of sound balloons inform the reader if the dialogue is internal or electronically transmitted, and so on.

The splash page contains just the one illustration: Cousin Mersh is walking hand-in-hand with a young boy who is listening to Mersh tell him to "Keep your mouth shut and stay close by me ...This is an enemy block" (19). Comic books use panels and the turning of pages to add pauses and to elicit drama much in the same way as a storyteller does: to arouse interest and intensify emotional responses to the story. The reader knows the two boys are going into possible danger but will not know what happens next until the page is turned.

The next two pages transport the reader to the steps of a tenement building where three louts (easy to recognize by their body language, dress, and method of speech) are watching the two boys approach. The reader, through the dialogue of the three bullies, discovers their plan. These bullies had physically beaten Cousin Mersh up before and are looking for a way to enliven the process for today. The gang leader decides to conduct a lottery. Two pieces of paper are put in a hat and Cousin Mersh is to draw one out. If he chooses the one that says "guilty," the bullies will give him another beating. If he chooses the one that is blank, however, he will be left alone. The bullies are delighted with their plan for they have secretly written "guilty" on both pieces of paper. The reader's last image before the page is turned is that of Cousin Mersh and his charge walking up to the three smug bullies on the steps. On the next two pages, their plan is put into effect and the final impression here is of Cousin Mersh selecting a piece of paper from the hat with his cousin fearfully looking on and the three bullies totally pleased with themselves and the situation.

The page is turned and the reader, along with the three bullies, waits in anticipation as Cousin Mersh opens the selected piece of paper and reads it. Before any of the spectators, including the reader, can see what is on the piece of paper, Cousin Mersh swallows it. He then confronts the bemused trio, "So, now . . . open up the other paper! . . . What does it say?" (25). "Guilty" is the answer!

We turn the page to see the two boys walking away in victory after claiming that the blank piece of paper must have been the one that was swallowed! The final two "panels" have Cousin Mersh explaining the street magic to the young boy and ends with a caveat: "Keep walking! Don't look back" (26).

The story is told visually but employs the oral storyteller's toolkit of sound (how the words are presented in the sound balloons for the "actor" to say out loud including pitch, volume, and rate of speech); gesture and body language (facial expressions and non-verbal body clues of all the characters); timing (exemplified by the number of panels on each page and the turning of it); and stereotypes (the reader immediately recognizes the role of all the characters in this story). The only information that is given outside of the comic book format is Eisner's written prologue, putting the situation into context. He points out that this magic has been transported from the old world. And to me, the magic was not only this minor miracle, but was the incorporation of an old tale for a new audience.

I immediately recognized the Jewish folktale that it was based upon, "The Rabbi and the Inquisitor." I am not sure how many readers would realize that this particular story in this collection was not reminiscent of the comic book elder but of a tale well employed. It was certainly not recognized in the numerous reviews when the graphic novel was released. Typical of the commentary is the following excerpts from the on-line review by Todd Warren.

Minor Miracles is a collection of four short stories set in and around the tenements of New York's Dropsie Avenue, the Jewish neighborhood of Eisner's youth. That setting has become fertile ground for the folktale-like stories that appear in much of his work. The stories are remembered from his childhood, and the misty veil of time transforms the tales into cultural myths. . . "Street Magic" is about the survival skills needed to safely navigate through hostile neighborhoods in New York. The skills are passed down from older family members, and in this story, Cousin Mersh teaches young Will how to handle the neighborhood toughs. (Warren)

Eisner states in his forward that these tales, "while they are apocryphal, they were nevertheless distilled from my remembrance of those that were the common property of our family" (2). These minor miracles, he continues, are a sort of cultural inheritance and similar themes can be found in classical Yiddish folklore and in old German folktales (3). One version of the traditional tale can be found in Ausbel's *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (36) and Sherman's *A Sampler of Jewish American Folklore* (101-2). In her note on the folktale, Josepha Sherman states that this story is known to her in both a Jewish version and in a non-Jewish variant.

The idea of rigged lots, with a clever person overcoming the fact that both papers have been marked "Guilty" (or, in the case of a nonliterate culture, both pebbles painted black) by swallowing one of the lots is a common folkloric "gimmick" throughout the world. Most of the

time, the gambler is risking his own life, though, not the life of a whole community as well, and often the gambler is guilty, a rogue managing to escape justice. (Sherman 187)

We turn now to see how other folktales have fared in the contemporary comic book and graphic novel format. The term graphic novel is used fairly loosely here in that it also refers to anthologies of stories, reprints of serialized comic issues, and the stand-alone novel. “Graphic novels are printed on better-quality paper and bound more carefully, often in hard-cover. The extended lifespan and traditional book shape give graphic novels a certain legitimacy that their flimsy comic brethren never had” (Long Chapter One).

One recent article on folklore in comic books can be found online. The authors state that “the use of folklore in comic books can range from wholesale reproductions to imaginative variations and alterations of well-known folk narratives, from the subtle inclusion of motifs, references, and particularly, folk beliefs, in story-lines and characterizations, to the blatant reintroduction of stock folkloric characters” (Banks and Wein). Banks and Wein cite the appearance of Thomas the Rhymer from Scottish ballads and Baba Yaga from Russian folklore in *Books of Magic 3* and Loki and the parliament of rooks in the *Sandman* series as examples of the inclusions of references into storylines. They assert that numerous comic book creators borrow the themes and ideas from folklore and folklore theory for the development of their narratives. Their article analyses three series published by DC comics that have a heavy dependence on folklore within their storyline, characterization, illustration and incidental dialogue. The three are *Swamp Thing*, *The Sandman*, and *Hellblazer*. In this article I am concerned only with one of these three, *The Sandman*.

Neil Gaiman, author of *The Sandman*, has indicated that his reference tools include Frazer, Joseph Campbell and Andrew Lang among other “popular” standard sources of folklore for the lay reader. Banks and Wein remark that these are sources that “the average reader wanting information about folk religion and ritual finds in general bookstores and reads with pleasure” (Banks and Wein). They discuss Gaiman’s use of the Jewish folklore character Lilith to demonstrate that many of his sources went beyond the more popular ones as well. There are few readers who would understand the role of such a character in the traditional literature since Lilith is only mentioned once in the Hebrew Bible and is developed as a character only in the Apocrypha of the Hebrew Bible and in the rabbinical commentary, the Aggadah (Banks and Wein). They also briefly discuss Gaiman’s series as “a journey through folklore, myth, legend, and imagination where archetypal motifs are continually brought to the fore.”

It is not my intent to address the use of archetypes, motifs, and the world of folklore but rather on the inclusion of traditional folktales in *The Sandman* and other comic books and graphic novels. For the purpose of classification, the stories discussed below will be categorized according to the Banks and Wein’s observation about the use of folklore in comic books: wholesale reproductions of traditional tales; reworkings of traditional tales; and the including of folktales in ongoing story lines.

An interesting observation about the titles discussed in the next section: Only a few of the hard cover books are sold in regular bookstores (i.e. Spiegelman, Shepard) while the majority of the

titles are available through specialty comic book shops. *Little Lit* is actually found in both types of bookstores.

Wholesale reproductions of traditional tales:

The Big Book of Grimm as Channeled by Jonathan Vankin & Over 50 Top Comics Artists. Paradox, 1999 [1-56389-501-3]

The idea behind this collection and other titles in the Big Book series was to create comics for people who would never normally read comic books. “The idea was to take the strangest and scariest of the Grimm Brothers’ stories and return them to their very bizarre and disturbing roots” (Vess). Vankin’s adaptations of these tales are undertaken concisely and in various degrees of successfulness, by a wide variety of illustrators including the distinctive styles of Charles Vess, Gahan Wilson, Sergio Aragones and Colleen Doran. The Grimms’ canon are arranged in five basic categories: family hell, prisoners of childhood, nuptial nightmares, magical strangers and lessons learned—the hard way. The stories can be read for sheer pleasure (some frustration too, I must admit) but also there is joy in comparing Hind’s graphic novel of *Bearskin* with Gahan Wilson’s quirky retelling of the same tale to see how differently the story can be told in this medium. I strongly suggest a look at both Wenzel’s colour filled fully bodied telling of “Snow White” in the entry below and Vess’ delicate but powerful black and white illustrated tale included in this collection. (I am pleased to tell you that both incorporate all three of Snow White’s trials at the home of the realistically rendered dwarfs, the accidental dislodging of the apple, and the final dance of the evil stepmother.) There is no kiss to break the spell in Michael Collins “The Frog Prince” either! The comic book style font “SPLAT” tells this part of the tale very well.

There are disappointments as well but much of that has to do with the limited amount of time allotted to the telling of the tale. This collection could easily work as a primer for learning these stories as only the essential elements are included in the telling.

Eisner, Will. “Street Magic.” *Minor Miracles*. DC Comics, 2000, 19-26. [1-56389-755-5]. This story was discussed in detail in the body of the article.

Eisner, Will. *The Princess and the Frog*. NMB Publishing, 2000.

I find it exhilarating to address a younger audience for a change. Here, I can depart from the rigid text and illustration format common to standard children’s books and render the story in the dramatic story-telling medium of sequentially deployed images (Eisner, quoted in Smith).

Eisner’s full version of the folk tale *The Princess and the Frog* began as an experiment with television and literacy. He produced a series of stills that had limited animation designed for the small screen but the project did not develop much further and so he reworked the series to publish as a hard cover graphic novel. Eisner states that he couldn’t help but altering the traditional story somewhat. “I was astounded when I read the original Grimm story fairy tale to find she was really a rather bitchy lady (laughs). When I grew up I always thought that she was a kind and sweet and lovely girl” (Wolborsky). This tale is directed to a younger audience than some of the other tales in this list. It is also of interest to older readers as well.

Hinds, Garth. *Bearskin: A Grimm Tale*. THE COMIC.COM, 1998. [1-893131-00-9]

Grimms' "Bearskin" vividly comes to life in this graphic novel interpretation as Hinds demonstrates some of the powerful capabilities of sequential art. This is the tale of a soldier who makes a deal with a devil: in order to be given countless riches, he must not trim his hair or nails or change his clothes for seven years. If he dies, his soul is forfeit. In his press release, Hinds asserts that this book is intended to build on the recent resurgence of interest in fairy tales as both timeless entertainment and deep wells of sociological and psychological information. His goal was to give the modern audience a faithful retelling of the story, with its original archetypal elements intact, as well as to flavor the tale with a distinct visual interpretation. In this, he does very well. The black and white illustrations, often reminiscent of woodcuts and etchings from the German renaissance, tell most of the story. There is limited dialogue but the tale is told with great care and respect and is intended for an older audience.

O'Connell, Michael and Jeff Curtis. "The Little Match Girl." *Mythography* #2 (February) 1997, (unpaged).

Illustrated in black and white, and also evocative of woodcuts, this is a faithful retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's classic tale. The reader is shown the cruelty of the father and the horror of the child's plight in detail but then, once the child begins to light the matches, the illustrations focus only on the girl, her face, and her hands as she holds the matches. Similar to an oral tale, the audience (reader) is told about the wonders that the child sees within the flames but none of these scenes are visible. They must be constructed from reading the dialogue and the body language of the girl and the reader's own imagination. This story, which may be more difficult to obtain because it is only in magazine format, is a compelling example of the parallels between the two formats.

Shepard, Aaron. *Master Man*. Illustrated by David Wisniewski. HarperCollins, 2001. [0-688-13783-0]

Retold by professional storyteller Aaron Shepard, this is an energetic adaptation of a Nigerian tall tale illustrated in comic book format by Caldecott Medal recipient, David Wisniewski. Wisniewski illustrates this tale combining traditional comic book elements such as frames and speech balloons with cut-paper collages and the colourful patterns and textures of Nigerian clothing and landscapes. *The Horn Book* starred review states that the "unlikely choice of illustrative style for the traditional tale proves unbeatable" (Adams 104).

The superhero stature of the characters readily translates to the deftly executed comic-book form. Squarish text blocks of narrative lead smoothly to white dialogue bubbles, and sound effects ("SPLASH!"; "ROAR") are brightly displayed in the art. The frame-by-frame progression underlines the comic timing of the story as well as the suspense, while the ample frame size—often just one or two frames per oversized page—lends itself to group sharing. (Adams 103-4)

Spiegelman, Art and Françoise Mouly, ed. *Little Lit: Folklore & Fairy Tale Funnies*. HarperCollins, 2000. [0-06-028624-5]

This anthology of twelve tales is presented in an oversized, hardcover picture book told by a wide variety of comic book artists (and some who are making their debut in this format) and represents a variety of cultures. Games, contests and other pages of whimsy accompany the stories. The folktales are:

“Prince Rooster,” a Hasidic parable, by Art Spiegelman,
William Joyce adapted the nursery rhyme of Humpty Dumpty in “Humpty Trouble,”
Daniel Clowes’ “The Sleeping Beauty” relates the often invisible ending of Perrault’s version of this tale,
Joost Swarte’s “The Leafless Tree” is an old Dutch folktale,
David Mazzucchelli travels to Japan with his “The Fisherman and the Sea Princess,”
“The Two Hunchbacks” found in Spain and Italy, is illustrated by Lorenzo Mattotti,
A reprint of Walt Kelly’s “The Gingerbread Man” from a 1943 issue of *Fairy Tale Parade*, a prolific and popular comic book series,
Harry Bliss’ “The Baker’s Daughter” from the United States,
Respected children’s illustrator (and new to comics) David Macaulay and his “Jack and the Beanstalk,”
Kaz’s Estonian tale, “The Hungry Horse,” and
Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Princess and the Pea” by Barbara McClintock.
Karen MacPhearson, in her review of *Little Lit* states that many of the tales, while entertaining, are also very dark. When she asked editor Spiegelman about this, he replied: “Children today often are raised on pasteurized versions of fairy tales, but the original stories are often disquieting and even frightening.” MacPhearson noted that “Like famed child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, Spiegelman believes that the dark side of fairy tales help children work through their deepest emotions—emotions they often hide from adults.” She continues on to report that since the publication of this book, it has garnered rave reviews from critics and consistently has shown up on The New York Times children’s best-seller list.

In this review, MacPhearson quotes Spiegelman and his rationale for editing this first volume of a proposed series of folktales in graphic format. “Comics are really one of the best ways of teaching a kid how to read,” Spiegelman said. “Kids don’t think of comics as medicine. And comics also offer a more lucid kind of storytelling than many other types of kids’ books.”

In another interview with Spiegelman, Joe Donahue also discusses the influence of the comic book format and reading. Spiegelman says that part of the rationale for this book is that his children learned to love books and to love reading through comic books. He states that comics: in some ways, are a more intuitive and natural way into understanding stories than even picture books. Because there’s so many pictures in succession that tells you so much of the story before you even get to the language, and there’s a high motivation to kind of understand what’s in those little bubbles, because you’ve already gotten two-thirds of the story, and this is a great way to get the rest of it. (Donahue)

Wenzel, David and Douglas Wheeler. *Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: Little Snow White, The Three Sluggards and The Shoemaker & the Elves*. NBM, 1995. 1-56165-130-2.

David Wenzel's illustrations bring the three stories vividly to life. The main focus of the collection is the story of Snow White. There are no cute caricatures to rescue our heroine from the folly of eating the apple provided by her wicked stepmother, but seven realistic dwarfs who loosen the laces and take the comb out of Snow White's hair before being stymied by the poisoned apple. This young Snow White lies "motionless seven years, her body continuing to grow as that of any other child, while her clothes and the coffin lengthened with her" (Wenzel, unpagged). Her awakening is not by a kiss, but by the stumbling of the servants who were carrying her coffin away and the death of the stepmother is conducted through the use of red-hot iron shoes. Finally, the story is told as it should be, with all its horror and joy! The book also includes a bibliography of five early collections of the Brothers Grimm.

Reworkings of traditional tales (adaptations other than ones made to the graphic format):

Medley, Linda. 1999. *Castle Waiting: The Curse of Brambly Hedge*. Rev. Ed. Olio. [0-9651852-1-4]

Medley introduces a subplot to the traditional tale of "Sleeping Beauty" by enlightening the reader of a rivalry between two wise women (witches). The king approaches the kindly one in order to help his wife conceive a child. The malicious witch is horrified that she has been overlooked and decides to seek revenge for this when she is not invited to the christening. When the king destroys all of the spindles in the kingdom, a guest appearance is made by a very famous spinner: Rumpelstiltskin. But, as in the classic tale, it is to no avail and the princess pricks her finger and falls asleep for one hundred years. Because the time limitation of the spell has passed, a young prince easily travels through the brambles, discovers the princess and wakes her with a kiss. Once the castle awakens the royal couple leave the castle and the castle becomes the refuge for the needy. Three of the original wise women are the only ones left and they are the narrators of this story. Their listener is the new adjutant, Rackham.

Medley's single issues of the comic book series follows the graphic novel to bring new life and adventures to the castle. The first seven issues have been collected in *Castle Waiting: The Lucky Road*, (2000. Cartoon Books, [1-8888963-07-7]) Rachel Hartman, in a recent article about the series, writes: "Maybe it's her obvious affection for the Middle Ages and folklore that attracts me, or maybe it's her consistently expressive and beautiful artwork, or her excellent storytelling and characterizations." I have to agree with Hartman, this is one of my favourite graphic novels and series and I highly recommend it to everyone I know. Not only does Medley evoke and intertwine traditional folklore characters (the Three Pigs, Iron Hans from "The Frog King," Rumpelstiltskin and others) in the storyline, she brings the community of the castle truly to life. Medley describes her story as: ". . . a fairy tale . . . not about rescuing the princess, saving the kingdom, or fighting the Ultimate War Between Good and Evil, but about being a hero in your own home" (Hartman).

Inclusions of folktales in the ongoing story lines:

Gaiman, Neil. *The Sandman*. [series] DC/Vertigo: 75 issues, 1 Special 1989-1996.

There are so many instances of storytelling and folk tales or literary folktales in this series of tales that it is impossible to list them all. Sandman is Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams and is a member of the family of the Endless, along with Desire, Despair, Destiny and others. "It's a comic crammed with ideas and a large cast of memorable characters, who are given some great dialogue (particularly Delirium), and Neil Gaiman writes with an impressive command of styles and techniques. Add to this the artwork to match and amplify, and at its best it is a startling, invigorating read" (Plowright 473).

Everitt Long, in his thesis on the series states:

The Sandman is a story about storytelling, centered on a metaphysical personification of storytelling. The reader's attention is constantly drawn to the extensive array of narrative techniques used in the series. Individual issues (or portion of issues) are told as different genres: horror stories, fairy tales, gospel stories, picaresque, Shakespearean comedy etc. One story arc, "The World's End," features a motley collection of travelers stranded at an inn, who pass the time away by telling stories, a la *Canterbury Tales*" (Long Chapter 2)

Long discusses several of the folk tale related and storytelling stories in his look at the series. For example, the story of "Ramadan" in *Fables and Reflections*, is heavily reminiscent of *The Arabian Nights*. The caliph, Haroun Al Raschid, is weighted down by the knowledge that even his wondrous kingdom will pass into history. In order to preserve it, he bargains with Dream [the Sandman]. Dream purchases the kingdom, preserving its magic and memory. The bargain turns Baghdad into a city of the mundane. On the last page of the issue, we find that the whole story is told by a beggar to a crippled child in the bombed out remains of post-Gulf War Baghdad. . . The past is preserved and recalled, not through the particular details of the story, since this is a modern story and not out of *The Arabian Nights*, but through the mode of its transmission, by the fact that it is told in the style of *The Arabian Nights*, that *The Arabian Nights* is a necessary intertext to "Ramadan." The past that is preserved is not a glorious historical past, but a counter history—the narrative past, a tradition of storytelling. (Long Chapter 3)

The World's End connects numerous stories using a traditional framing device in the manner of *Canterbury Tales* and *The Arabian Nights*. Neil Gaiman explains that "I liked the idea of using one of the oldest storytelling devices in the English language. If you're going to steal, you might as well do so from a great source, and *Canterbury Tales* definitely qualifies" (Bender 176). Long reports that the effect of the storytelling of these travelers' personal stories is "to inscribe the storyteller (not the author) into the stories. The insertion of different genres and styles places an emphasis on the crafting of the tale" (Long Chapter 3).

In the midst of part 6 of *The Kindly Ones*, there is a telling of an obscure English fairy tale, "The Children who flew Away." The tale, in this instance, is set apart from the primary narrative by being illustrated in a different style and by a different illustrator, Charles Vess. The act of storytelling is inscribed into the primary story and, according to Long, helps the reader realize that alternative possibilities in the form of alternative stories exist" (Long Chapter 3). Neil Gaiman stated "it's a folk tale about what revenge is for and what it does. The original version I ran across was in a bizarre dialect" (Bender 198). I have not as yet been able to find a traditional version of this tale. The different style referred to at the beginning of the paragraph is one

recognizable to fans of Vess' work and another collaboration with Neil Gaiman, *Stardust*. It is not technically in comic book format but is an illustrated short story. It is, however, filled with traditional oral storytelling techniques such as openings and closings and audience participation and asides. "24 hours," in the collection *Preludes and Nocturnes*, "contains an extended essay about the nature of storytelling, which is largely what *Preludes and Nocturnes* is about. The essay also provides considerable information about the entire series, including this line on page 4: 'She's realized the real problem with stories—if you keep them going long enough, they always end in death'" (Bender, 256).ⁱ

Long concludes his discussion of *The Sandman* by saying that "this tradition of storytelling [in the series] does not only attempt to connect stories to the past but also to the present. In *The Sandman* there is a belief that stories can still say something directly about reality, although it recognizes that reality may not be able to listen" (Long Chapter 3). I highly recommend this series for mature readers. There is darkness but then, as Art Spiegelman reflected above, there has always been darkness in these powerful tales.

Gaiman, Neil. *The Books of Magic*. [original issues 1-4]

Once again, Gaiman incorporates elements from universal folklore in telling this tale. We meet Lucifer, Merlin, the Archangels, Thomas the Rhymer, King Arthur and, in one story arc, Baba Yaga. Thirteen-year-old Tim Hunter is the designated heir to the power of magic in the DC Universe, and 4 supernatural beings must determine whether he can be allowed to attain that power, or whether he must be destroyed to save humanity. In one story arc, Tim is on one of his trials and is told to stay on the path but inevitably gets lost and finds himself in the clutches of the Russian folk tale witch Baba Yaga. Carefully and lavishly rendered by illustrator Charles Vess, traditional elements of the Baba Yaga stories appear: the house built on chicken legs; the fence constructed of human skulls; the cannibalistic leanings of the witch; and her mode of transportation, a pestle and mortar. Tim escapes because his rescuer knows Baba Yaga's name, another powerful element from folklore. *The Books of Magic* ongoing series, written by John Ney Rieber and drawn, mostly, by Peter Snejbjerg, follows young Tim as he struggles through adolescence, a tricky enough minefield for anyone, let alone someone of his potential power. Tim keeps his perspective through all these upheavals with a hard core of common sense and a refreshing sense of humour.

Literary Fairy Tales

There is a fourth category that is not included in Banks' and Wein's article discussed above and that is the original literary fairy tale in comic book format. The most successful of these is another Gaiman and Vess collaboration. The story of *Stardust* has three incarnations: as a four-part series, a graphic novel, and a novel without any of the illustrations. *Stardust*, although created by two well-known names in the comic book industry, is not technically a comic but is actually an illustrated novel. It is more a fantasy than a fairy tale and, as Gaiman is quoted, "more a fairy story for adults. The last fairy story that I can think of for adults was probably *The Princess Bride*, 25 years ago. I think people miss fairy tales. I think people respond to them, which is why romance readers and why historical readers and why literature readers are

responding to *Stardust* too (Gaiman). *Stardust* was the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award winner for Adult Literature for 1999.

The telling of *Stardust* is very traditional and verbose, in the style of Britain's nostalgic fictional Victoriana. But Gaiman also draws on the darker side of traditional fairy tales . . . In going "back to the sources" for many of his elements Gaiman has forged a tale which is never offensive, but easily capable of shocking those expecting a bedtime read for children. Though probably not for the children themselves. (Johnson)

This is just a beginning look at the reworking of folktales in the graphic format. As I finish this article, I am looking forward to reading a new purchase: *Green Lantern: 101 Emerald Nights*, a graphic novel which employs the Arabian Nights frame story to explore the mythology of an old DC superhero character, The Green Lantern. The illustrations are exquisite – and the tale, well I am afraid you are just going to have to wait for another night (I mean day).

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ⁱ Two of the tales in the series, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (#19) and "The Tempest" (#75) are Gaiman's nod to William Shakespeare, and tell of the bard's relationship with the incarnation of storytelling, how the dreamlord fulfilled Shakespeare's wish to give men dreams that would live on long after he was gone. These two tales exist both because of Gaiman's passion for Shakespeare, and his work with Charles Vess, the illustrator, who seems to specialize in drawing fairies.

Charles Vess's distinctive style can also be seen in his *Book of Ballads and Sagas* where he illustrates Child Ballads rewritten by Jane Yolen, Charles de Lint, Sharon McCrumb and others.

Under the category of Fairy Tales and Magic, in Kit Kan's "Recommended Graphic Novels for Libraries," (*VOYA*, Dec. 2000, 322-4), she includes: *Castle Waiting*, *Stardust*, and all the issues of *The Sandman*, as well as *The Books of Faerie* which is an off-shoot of *The Books of Magic*.